Picket Line

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One of the most consistent criticisms of Australia's shift to more decentralised industrial relations concerns the perceived loss of an overall equity focus. Traditionally, our emphasis on relatively-centralised wage fixing through the award system has narrowed the gap between high and low wage employees. Australia has enjoyed one of the lowest male-female wage differentials in the western world.

Now, with the swing to local-enterprise negotiation of wages and employment conditions, many fear that differentials will widen. And these suspicions are certainly reinforced by details of pay outcomes released to coincide with the first anniversary of the *Industrial relations reform act's* proclamation. A major survey by the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research shows clearly that the days when wage rises flowed easily within and across industry sectors and occupations are gone. Wide diversity in wage outcomes is no doubt reassuring for those seeking to avoid a wholesale wage break out as the economy picks up. But for some workers, the findings must raise the spectre of loss of relativity with traditional peer groups and a resultant slide down the salary pecking order.

Some examples quickly tell the story: in the manufacturing sector wage increases over the past year ranged from 1.5 per cent to 14.8 per cent; in recreation from 0.7 per cent to 14.8 per cent; in the metal industry from 0.3 per cent to 10 per cent; and in public utilities from 0.8 per cent to 11.3 per cent. Even in sectors such as transport, which have focused heavily on industry-wide industrial campaigns rather than taking up enterprise bargaining, there are fluctuations from 1.5 per cent to 6.5 per cent.

These outcomes represent a massive break with traditions built up over most of this century. The clear implication is that, once enterprise bargaining becomes the dominant avenue for negotiation, there is an automatic breakdown in industry-wide standards. And as some commentators are pointing out, the risk is that low wage ghettos could develop, especially in the non-unionised sectors of industry. Such dangers highlight the importance of protections to ensure that enterprise bargaining operates in ways which safeguard the interests of employees in all categories. In other words, equality-of-opportunity strategies will need to extend directly into negotiation of enterprise agreements if some of the worst risks are to avoided.

In this climate, recent publication by the Affirmative Action Agency of its monograph *Negotiating equity: affirmative action in enterprise bargaining*, AGPS 1994, ISBN 0 644 32641 7 is timely. While its recommendations are focused directly on women workers, they are also highly relevant for any employees concerned with protecting their position in the new IR system. Central to the proposed approach is use of statutory requirements in the Affirmative Action Act as a framework for enterprise bargaining. The monograph places particular stress on the employer's legal duty to *consult* with all employees (especially women), to analyse *employment profiles* and to review all *personnel policies* and practices. Enforcement of these rights, it is argued, provides a sound and practical way to ensure a wide bargaining agenda — a crucial vehicle for achieving worthwhile outcomes.

The monograph recommends that consultation on affirmative action (AA) or equal employment opportunity (EEO) be linked to that for enterprise agreements. For example, the existing AA or EEO consultative committee (and all organisations with 100 employees are legally required to have one) could be directly involved in enterprise bargaining. This would almost certainly mean inclusion of representatives from groups who otherwise might not be involved. And the Affirmative Action or EEO officer should play a major role in development of enterprise agreements, as provider of specialised advice. Reasonable employers will find it difficult to object to this course, since it is entirely consistent with their clear legal responsibilities.

The same can be said of employment profiles and personnel policies. Because both must be reviewed under EEO or AA law, librarians will miss a genuine opportunity if they do not insist on their inclusion in the bargaining agenda. Once they have achieved inclusion of these items, creative proposals can be developed in areas such as job redesign, correction of pay inequities and fairer recognition of skills, training and education. Above all, widening the subject areas for bargaining in this way can help employees take a front-foot approach, rather than merely reacting to management proposals. Ultimately, the extent to which employees are able to cope with the new industrial relations system will be largely a product of how much they take part in setting the agenda. Basic fairness demands that all employment groups should be involved. The new industrial relations system *is* about changes to long-established processes. But it is impossible to disagree with the Affirmative Action Agency's conclusion: that while enterprise bargaining gives employers, workers and unions greater power to directly determine working conditions, it also re-emphasises their responsibility for ensuring fairness and upholding equal employment opportunity principles in doing so. ■